Five Years in Siberia: A War Prisoner's Story

The writer of this story, Max May, a Berlin attorney, escaped from Siberia after five years as a prisoner of war. His experiences in dealing with the Communists are most interesting as is his first-hand account of the speculation and graft that permeate official Russia. The story has been translated from the Vossiche Zeitung, of Berlin, Germany.

FOR THE fifth time we had undergone the Siberian winter. We had, besides the fearful snowstorms of this year, that terrible epidemic of spotted typhus of which history knows so well. We had also seen the retreat of the demoralized army of Admiral Kolchak, a retreat that only can be compared to the disintegration of the Napoleonic Army, of 1812.

Now, after the passage of two years, the Bolshevik had come again to Siberia. With this, a new hope of the journey home shone for us, for we believed that the way to the west would be opened to us as, after the peace of Brest-Litovsk, the prisoners in European Russia were sent home.

At first, the Bolsheviki were hailed as the liberators of Siberia. In many districts, work was again undertaken under the slogan of "Everything for the Army," comissaries controlled everywhere, all trade was prohibited, and the Kolchak money, which for two years was current in Siberia, at one blow was made worthless. Even we prisoners of war lost through this the meager rubles that we had toilsomely saved.

Still we did not complain, for we believed that we stood on the threshold of our return home. Weeks and weeks passed, and our constant questions as to the day of departure received only one answer, there had been no orders from Moscow.

In the meantime, the German, and foremost the Hungarian Communists organized and, strongly supported by the Soviet, began a giant propaganda. Red Cross organizations were broken up. The communistic organizations of prisoners of war took over the effects of dead prisoners, regardless of whether these were willed to wife and child at home. News was distributed by these organizations that we were not wanted at home because the infection of Bolshevism was feared and that in Germany times were so terrible that they could hardly be endured. A hundred and fifty thousand workmen had already been sent from Germany to Russia, because it was impossible to support them at home.

Propaganda to enlist in the Red Army was strongly pushed. Though the Germans almost to a man held back, the Hungarians enlisted in considerable numbers. International battalions, chiefly made up of Hungarians, undertook the work of watching all roads and recapturing all escaped prisoners of war and bringing them back for forced labor.

The Trials of Travel

IN SPITE of everything, the urge for freedom and the fear of another winter in Siberia was so great that many prisoners tried their luck. I, because of a severe injury in the previous year, was accounted an invalid. In spite of my efforts, I could obtain no permission to travel from the control office for prisoners of war so that flight was impossible.

At that time I was working in a large factory. To travel, it was necessary to obtain the permission of the labor office, which never was given unless one could place a substitute at one's work. Many prisoners of war were refused passes on this ground so that they are still held in Siberia.

Finally I got my travel pass, but still could not use the railway trains which, in Russia today, are no longer for private use. Only the military and persons under "command" of the state may ride on railway trains. I obtained a "command" to go to Omsk. This, however, would not obtain me a railway ticket. A whole row of officials had first to inspect the "command," finally the notorious Tschreswytschaika, or, as it is abbreviated, the Tscheka, the extraordinary commission for fighting the counter-revolution, that often makes all one's labors useless.

A train left the station from which I intended to depart at 9 o'clock in the morning. At 7 o'clock I was already at the gates, since, in spite of all travel restrictions, there is fearful crush on all trains. At half past ten I got to the ticket window and paid 320 rubles for a ticket for 600 versts. The ticket was one of the old sort, and still was marked with the old fare, four rubles, 65 kopecks.

The train was made up of freight cars and one sleeping car in which only commissaries and other Soviet officials could travel. The service on the Siberian part of the trip was not bad. One could buy food, though at high prices, which rose as one approached the larger cities. It is forbidden to sell butter in Siberia, as this must be sent to European Russia and to the army. In spite of this, at every railway station there was a lively trade in tiny pats of butter.

After 22 hours of riding through a hot summer day we came to Omsk. I was brought before the officials to which my "command" directed me and lived overnight on the provisions I had brought with me. In my hope of a further "command" to go on from Omsk I was disappointed.

The number of prisoners of war in Omsk is still remarkably large, since the place is the central station of the communistic prisoners of war agitation. It is, therefore, especially difficult to get away from Omsk in any regular way, and I decided to resume my journey as a "Black Rider," without documents and without ticket.

To be as little weighted down as possible, I sold all my belongings to a Russian who did a secret, speculative trade—since all trade is forbidden. Since departure from the large station at Omsk appeared to me to be dangerous, I decided to leave from a smaller station. A Russian fisherman carried me and a comrade who accompanied me across the Irtisch.

The man was a former railway man and a member of the Communist party. He recognized us as prisoners of war and told us that he had ferried many of our comrades in fate. He said that he had much for which to thank the Communists, as they had taught him to read and write. As an experienced railwayman he was able to give us much good advice as to our further travels, and besought us in the end not to say anything evil of Russian communism, despite our experiences.

On our arrival at the station, we decided to board a trainload of artillery bound for the Polish front. The "comrade commander," a boyish officer, understood our position and permitted us to travel with the train. I was sent into a car with eight horses and two Russian soldiers.

Forests Full of Deserters

OUR trip did not last long, for at the next station Hungarian Communists inspected the train. The commander, who now feared unpleasantness, gave orders that the prisoners of war be put off the train. A Russian soldier, however, took me with him, for which he asked that I should write him a furlough certificate. He said he would easily get the stamp and the signature, but that I should write the pass, so that he could desert to his home near the Volga. I wrote the certificate gladly. Desertion from the Red Army is fearfully great, in spite of all instructions and propaganda of the government. I have been told that the forests of central Russia house many thousands of descrters. I have myself seen at railway stations large troops of captured deserters.

Travel on the military train lasted for eight days, when we found ourselves in the neighborhood of Moscow, where I had to leave it to avoid the station at Moscow. In the eight days I had the opportunity to get many interesting glimpses of the Russian situation.

All persons who leave Siberia for European Russia take salt with them as an article of trade, since there is a fearful shortage in western Russia. Naturally, trade in this is especially forbidden. The further west one goes, the higher is the price of salt. While a pound costs only 15 rubles in the Urals, in Central Russia it rises to from 800 to 1,000 rubles. In the night, dark figures came to our cars and dealt with the soldiers. The men on our train earned on the trip 300,000 rubles.

Even officials of the Soviet Government, whose pay is only between 750 and 2,800 rubles, cannot live on this and naturally speculate in all sorts of articles. Because of this, on every train there are persons of all classes of society who, in spite of all dangers, take business trips.

Railway officials profit the most, who, for example, buy a pound of tea in Siberia for 2,000 rubles and sell it in the west for 12,000 rubles. These people risk cheerfully arrest at the next control station, with forced labor to follow.

At every station in western Russia one found women and children coming to the cars to beg bread. The quality of bread in the cities is so bad that dysentery is widespread, while there are few drugs and the cost of dietary treatment is prohibitive.

If one has the opportunity to go to the home of a Soviet commissary, one finds that the finest white bread, butter and sugar deck the table. Enormous quantities of provisions leave Siberia for the west. Where these disappear, no one knows. In Petrograd, the inhabitants believe that the great mass of grain and butter is smuggled over the border to Finland.

Pass Prisoners Along

HAVING left the military train at a small station near Moscow, I intended to make a detour to the west and strike the main line of the railroad between Moscow and Petrograd. Unhappily, it did not occur to me that this stretch came within the compass of the Polish front, and therefore would be especially well patrolled. The start of my journey on, after I and other prisoners of war had boarded a freight train, was not interrupted by cities. At midnight, however, there appeared suddenly at a station officials of the Tschrewytschaika.

I was brought before the commissary on duty, a very young person, who, although he was not unfriendly, told me that because of the absence of the necessary documents permitting me to ride on railway trains I must be jailed. I told him that I had already put 4,000 versts behind me. If I had come that far, I said, it was the fault of the Soviet Government whose officials should have stopped me at the start of my long trip.

Probably the young commissary had never before heard such an unabashed statement.

It impressed him so that he said, "Now ride with God, and carry the revolution to Germany!"

We were all allowed to get back on the train, which carried us to the station of Rszew, to the westward of Moscow.

At this station, the regulation prelude to the departure of a train was being played. The station master declared that there would not be another train that day. Platforms and waiting rooms were cleared for the night by the police. With a number of other men, I managed to steal back to the platform.

About three o'clock in the morning, an old railway official came to us and whispered that a freight train would soon depart. The station master, however, had given orders that the departure should be kept secret so that no one could get away by this train. We caught this freight, which took us to a woodcutting station in a forest, from which we had to make our way back to the nearest village on foot. Here we were arrested by the local militia and sent to the nearest city as police prisoners.

At the police station, which was remarkably clean, we were astonishingly well treated. Most of the policemen had been prisoners in Germany, sympathized with our position, and gave us papers to permit us to travel to the next government city.

It was symptomatic that in this city, lying near Moscow, we met no regulations for disposal of prisoners of war. Every official sought to get rid of the prisoners and turn the responsibility over to someone else. Armed with our papers, we boarded another freight which took us about 10 versts west to the Moscow-Petrograd line. Instead of going south toward Moscow, we now decided to go north to Petrograd, in spite of the danger that we would be arrested again.

At midnight, an express train with fine Pullmans pulled into our station. This a rarity in present-day Russia. Elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen were the passengers, and at the windows were cards stating that this train was for the use only of Soviet commissaries and officers of the army.

On the advice of a railroad official, whom we took into our confidence, we boarded the express train. The man said that no one would dare disturb the commissaries during their sleep by an inspection of the train and that by the next morning we would be so close to Petrograd that they would let us go on.

As he said, we did not reach the first inspection station till morning, and then we were thrown out of the Pullmans, but permitted to ride in other coaches, though these were already crowded with persons who had boarded the train in much the same way as we had. They claimed that persons at various stations had sold them tickets to ride on the express.

When we reached Petrograd, our coach was surrounded by soldiers with fixed bayonets and the whole 200 occupants were marched off like felons to the military control bureau, and from there driven into a wooden building. The room was already overcrowded, as some 200 or 300 persons had been arrested on a previous train.

Husbands in Demand

THE German Soldiers and Workman's Council looks after prisoners of war who arrive at Petrograd in noteworthy fashion. Prisoners arriving singly are turned over to larger groups, and provided with the necessary papers. After some days' delay, during which we were permitted to move freely about the city, we were attached to a convoy of invalids from Siberia.

The situation in Petrograd has been told often enough. One interesting sidelight, however, we were able to observe at the Soldiers and Workmen's Council bureau. There appeared daily women and girls of what were formerly the better classes of Petrograd society who inquired for unmarried prisoners of war. Their greatest desire is to leave Russia at any price. They, therefore, look for prisoners with whom to go through the form of marriage, enabling them to cross the frontier as their wives. On the day I left, one woman paid 100,000 marks for such a mock marriage.

From Petrograd the convoys go to the station of Jamburg near the Esthonian border. Here we had to wait for two days, while the Esthonian authorities prepared to take charge of us, living in constant fear that an order would come from Petrograd to have us held in Russia. We were badly cared for, in spite of the fact that we were a convoy of invalids.

During our stay there, a member of the Russian Communist party went from coach to coach and made propaganda speeches in the Russian tongue. We met, also, a train of Russian prisoners returning from Germany who were openly being turned into Bolsheviki on their way to the border. Russian prisoners whom I told of circumstances in the interior of Russia simply would not believe me. When one meets these men in the Russian interior, one hears a universal wish, that as soon as possible they may go back to Germany.

At Jamburg we saw at the station a long, splendid hospital train, with beautiful white-painted Pullmans that obviously had the most modern hospital equipment. Just before we were ordered to go to Esthonia, we were ordered to leave our train and with all our baggage to get aboard the beautiful hospital train. Sick and invalids had to pack their belongings and change trains. And why? To go to the exchange station on the border, 15 versts away.

There were the gentlemen of the International Red Cross Commission, Americans and Swiss. They were naturally pleasantly moved by the splendid handling of invalids and prisoners in an elegant hospital train. I wonder if they ever noted the number of this train and recognized that the same train appeared every few days? When we went through the International Transfer Camp at Narva, this was not known. We had to listen to words about "the generous spirit of the Bolsheviki" who sent the invalids home from Siberia in white-painted Pullmans.